

Reflections on Reunification

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After years of reacting to North Korean proposals on reunification Seoul has seized the initiative on the issue, prompting counterproposals from P'yongyang that are both negative and defensive. President Chun Doo Hwan's speech to the ROK National Assembly on 22 January outlined the unification initiative, thereby refocusing international attention on this issue—now over three decades old. Chun's proposal is the most detailed and flexible the South Korean Government has put forward. In essence it calls for normalizing relations through an interim agreement that relies heavily on measures to reduce current North-South tensions. The longer term part of the plan calls for drafting a constitution for a unified Korea, a referendum to legalize it, and the establishment of a unified government through general elections.

Much of what South Korea proposed is not new. Some aspects are, in fact, similar to North Korea's latest major proposal for unification made at the Sixth Party Congress of the Korean Workers Party in October 1980. Yet there are enough new elements to demonstrate a genuine ROK interest in probing for openings on this issue even though Seoul correctly anticipated a negative reaction from the North. P'yongyang coupled its rejection with a new proposal clearly unacceptable to Seoul: a meeting of 100 Koreans—mostly pro-North or anti-South—to review the unification problem.

The question that naturally arises about such initiatives is whether either side has a genuine interest in seeking progress through compromise and conciliation or is merely posturing for the international or domestic propaganda effect. Can the two Koreas, separated for so long, so heavily committed to the preservation of politically antithetical regimes, find any common ground for taking even the initial step toward unification? The prospects are not particularly hopeful.

The Perception From P'yongyang

Unification is the central element in North Korean ideology. Kim Il-song has made it the goal of his regime and has conducted his military, economic, foreign, and domestic policies toward that end for over 30 years. His strategy is simple. He has repeatedly sought to stimulate unrest in the South and encourage the withdrawal of US forces. P'yongyang has prepared a strong and effective military force to intervene in the South should major instability occur and the United States not be in a position to support the ROK. That this policy has not produced results does not seem to have discouraged Kim.

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One element of this strategy has been willingness to deal with South Korean officials at times when conditions in the South appeared favorable to the North. P'yongyang's dialogue with Seoul in 1971 and 1972, which involved a series of high-level exchanges and culminated in a North-South communique, is the clearest example. At that time, North Korea anticipated the complete withdrawal of US forces in a few years. It also calculated that Seoul would experience political unrest in the period leading up to the scheduled presidential elections in 1975. P'yongyang's posture, then as now, was to propose rapid, broad-gauged contacts to expose South Korea to maximum influence from the North while minimizing any impact the South could have within the North. P'yongyang also pressed for contact with the South in the troubled period following the death of President Park Chung Hee, again proposing a rapid and sweeping exchange. In both instances P'yongyang's interest in the dialogue ended once it determined that the prospects for unrest in the South had diminished and the United States was prepared to sustain military support of the South.

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Because of its commitment to unification P'yongyang has, however, felt compelled to appear to the world and to the Korean people as the more reasonable of the two parties. Even when it has seen no advantage in dealing with the South, P'yongyang has repeated its desire for unification, spelling out in various formulations proposals it first articulated in 1956. The essence has remained the same:

- Elimination of foreign influence in Korea (read the withdrawal of US forces).
- Modification of the political system in the South (a dismantling of the authoritarian political system there).
- Abolition of Seoul's anti-Communist policy (allowing antiregime or pro-Communist elements to function in the ROK).

While P'yongyang, in this connection, has offered to end its alliances with Moscow and Beijing, it has never intimated that it was prepared to modify its political system to accommodate the South. [redacted]

The Perspective From the South

Historically, Seoul has been on the defensive on the unification issue. Although clearly an important emotional issue for all Koreans—particularly the millions in the South who fled from the North during the Korean war—Seoul until recently has not felt strong enough to take the initiative and has been extremely cautious in responding to P'yongyang's proposals. Seoul engaged in the talks in 1971 and 1972 largely out of concern that potential US withdrawal and changing political alignments in the region—especially Sino-US rapprochement—made such a move necessary to protect its interest. [redacted]

In more recent times, particularly during the Carter administration, Seoul was reluctant to participate for fear that an active dialogue would accelerate the US force withdrawal planned at that time. Under President Chun, Seoul adopted a much more self-confident attitude toward the issue, based in part on a reassuring relationship with the United States. This was evident in President Chun's call for a summit with Kim Il-song shortly after assuming office. [redacted]

The Current Situation

President Chun's proposal is designed to serve several objectives. Primarily it demonstrates to both the domestic and international audience that Seoul now has the initiative on unification. Chun has laid down a series of basic issues which he believes should govern the dialogue between the two states. In doing so, he has placed considerable pressure on P'yongyang to respond, in part by cleverly incorporating much of P'yongyang's position into his own. This effort appears to reflect a genuine interest in developing measures that could, at a minimum, lead to a reduction of tension. Chun's Unification Minister later issued a 20-point proposal for consideration. Seoul for some time has maintained that meaningful dialogue could only begin with limited step-by-step measures—a position the North has repeatedly rejected. Seoul is fully aware that in accepting such limited measures North Korea would be according the ROK a form of legitimacy, while weakening its own broader schemes for unification and presenting to the outside world the image of two Korean states accepting the status quo. [redacted]

Prospects

South Korean leaders anticipated P'yongyang's negative reaction, but the restrained tone of the official response from senior Vice President Kim Il has encouraged Seoul. Kim Il's statement was designed not only as a response to Seoul's initiative but as a defense of P'yongyang's own position on unification. He noted the congruence of the ROK proposal with that of his government and listed the standard preconditions for dealing with the South, which the ROK finds unacceptable—withdrawal of US forces, modification of the political system in the South, and elimination of its anti-Communist posture. In doing so, he was attempting to demonstrate to the international audience—and perhaps the ROK populace—that Seoul, not P'yongyang, was the recalcitrant party by not responding to P'yongyang's legitimate demands. Nonetheless, P'yongyang has implicitly admitted that it now views the Chun government as the likely representative in the South for the foreseeable future and the party it will have to deal with should the proper conditions develop. [redacted]

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Kim Il's carefully worded statement has raised interest in the possibility of some new flexibility in North Korea's position on unification and, more generally, on dealing with the South—something P'yongyang doubtless intended and has sought to foster in private commentary at Panmunjom and elsewhere. But in the absence of some sign that internal developments in the North have dictated a change in policy, we are not likely to see any positive response unless P'yongyang perceives some opportunity to damage Seoul's political stability or its relations with the United States. Followup commentary from P'yongyang has been much tougher in criticizing the Chun government.

Panmunjom Talks?

Because Seoul's actions have placed it on the defensive, P'yongyang may feel the need to redress the balance. Lacking a political opening in the South, P'yongyang's primary course is likely to focus on the ROK-US relationship, seeking to exploit any existing fissures or to create some. P'yongyang has for some time been attempting to establish a dialogue with the United States, anticipating that this could create an irritant in Washington-Seoul ties. It has consistently claimed that the US military presence complicates progress toward unification and has called for the United States to negotiate a peace treaty to replace the armistice and to arrange withdrawal. Unification itself, however, has been reserved as a strictly Korean issue.

There is a limited possibility that the North could now see a blending of these two issues as a way of engaging the United States in dialogue. Some aspects of the South's recent proposals could give North Korea that opportunity. For example, a few of the 20 specific projects listed by the ROK Unification Minister relate to activity in the DMZ that are within the purview of the United States as the head of the UN Command. These include free movement of personnel through Panmunjom, removal of all military facilities in the DMZ, and use of the DMZ for nature study and sports activity. By showing some interest in these proposals but insisting that they be handled by the

United States through the Military Armistice Committee (MAC), P'yongyang could calculate that the United States would feel compelled to respond—with the ROK serving only as an observer, as is the case now at Panmunjom. Recent US actions—advance notification of military exercises and invitations to the North Koreans and Chinese to observe this year's Team Spirit exercise—have focused attention on the armistice machinery.

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The South Koreans, while opposed to US-North Korean contact outside the MAC forum, may not reject such contact at the MAC. They are familiar with the procedures and have been constantly assured that their interests will be protected. Seoul, moreover, could not object to some moves—such as it has proposed—which would lower the level of tension along the DMZ. From the South Korean perspective, North Korean willingness to engage in a dialogue on some specific MAC-related issues could be used to build a case for more substantial dialogue on matters related more directly to unification.

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For P'yongyang, such an arrangement would offer an expanded dialogue with the United States, possibly on the diplomatic or political level. It would also convey the impression that North Korea was agreeing to tension-reducing measures that neither implied greater recognition of the ROK Government nor appeared to be in direct response to South Korean initiatives.

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